DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 449 CG 021 791

AUTHOR Kunkel, Mark A.; And Others
TITLE Expectations about Counseling and Psychotherapy and Life Experiences in Elderly Persons.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association (35th, Houston, TX, April 13-15, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Client Characteristics (Human Services); Comparative Analysis; *Counseling Services; *Expectation; Higher Education; *Older Adults; *Psychotherapy; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Although expectations about counseling and psychotherapy have much potential influence on the tendency of elderly persons to seek counseling and on their response to the counseling encounter, there is little research available to assist those providing psychological services to this population. Expectations about counseling among the elderly were examined through individual and group interviews and through administration of the Expectations About Counseling-Brief Form (EAC-B) questionnaire, with appended demographic items, to persons aged 60 and over. Subjects' responses were compared to responses from a normative group of younger persons. Completed questionnaires from 82 older and 136 younger subjects were analyzed for age influences through a multivariate analysis of variance with each subject's EAC-B scale scores as the dependent variables. Significant differences were found on two EAC-B scales, with elderly subjects expressing significantly higher expectation for counselor Empathy than did younger subjects and significantly lower expectations for counselor Self-Disclosure. No other EAC-B scale score differences approached significance. EAC-B responses were interpreted in light of individual and group interviews with elderly persons. A consistent theme across groups was an abiding sense of suspicion and guardedness about psychology. Some areas of negative or unrealistic expectations about counseling among the elderly may explain their reluctance to seek such services, and suggest public education programs to modify these expectations. (Author/NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Expectations About Counseling and Psychotherapy and Life Experiences in Elderly Persons

Mark A. Kunkel

Joanne Plescia

Cherise Yungblut

Texas Tech University

Craig S. Williams

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mark A. Kunkel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 021791

Paper presented at the meeting of the South Western Psychological Association, Houston, TX, April, 1989.

Running Head: EXPECTATIONS ABOUT COUNSELING IN THE ELDERLY

Abstract

There continues to be a lack of research to assist those providing psychological services to the elderly. Expectations about counseling and psychotherapy have much potential influence on the tendency of elderly persons to seek counseling and their response to the counseling encounter. As part of a long-term research agenda, expectations about counseling among the elderly were clarified through individual and group interviews and through a questionnaire. The Expectations About Counseling-Brief Form (EAC-B) questionnaire, with appended demographic items, was administered to 550 persons age 60 and over in Texas, Tennessee and Yucata'n, Mexico and their responses compared to a normative group of younger persons. EAC-B responses were interpreted in light of individual and group interviews with elderly persons. Results suggest ways in which expectations about counseling differ among the elderly and the young. Some areas of negative or unrealistic expectations about counseling among the elderly may explain their reluctance to seek such services, and suggest public education programs to modify these expectations.

Mental health providers have become increasingly aware of their growing responsibility to the elderly. However, despite research suggesting that between 15% and 25% of the 28 million Americans age 65 or over suffer from significant mental health problems (Flemming, Rickards, Santos & West, 1986), only a small fraction of this number receive professional treatment (Roybal, 1988; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1982).

One of the obstacles to effective psychological intervention with the elderly continues to be the absence of informed theoretical perspectives. This is particularly true within counseling psychology, a specialty area purporting to enhance the development of normal persons across the life-span. Startlingly little attention has been given to factors influencing the tendency of elderly persons to seek psychological services, expectations held by the elderly of their behavior and that of the counselor within the therapeutic encounter, and the specific theoretical underpinnings of the counseling process with elderly persons.

All of these factors might be considered to influence the tendency of elderly persons to seek and benefit from psychological counseling. A model of such potential influences might include variables relating to psychological vulnerability and the accessibility of psychological services, the intersection of vulnerability and accessibility representing those elderly persons who may engage in psychological services (see Figure 1). Within this model, clarification of expectations about counseling among the elderly seems to be a good place to start given the

posited influence of these expectations on perceived accessibility and vulnerability (cf. Tinsley, Workman & Kass, 1980).

Previous counseling expectation investigations conducted by the first author have included relatively small samples of elderly subjects in a cross-cultural setting (Kunkel, Hector, Go'ngora-Coronado & Castillo-Vales, in press) and from a community senior citizen center (Kunkel & Williams, 1987). However, no previous investigation has employed sample sizes sufficient to enable the statistical procedures (e.g. reliability analysis, analysis of variance, factor analysis) necessary to evaluate the suitability of the instrument for this group, determine effects of gender and previous counseling experience on expectations, compare expectations of elderly and younger persons, and clarify overall theoretical underpinnings of expectations of counseling among the elderly.

Previous investigations have been somewhat limited as well in their reliance on completion of a questionnaire, albeit one with well established statistical and pragmatic precedent. A "triangulated" research approach (cf. Hoshmand, 1989) in which quantifiable and objective data (such as that from a survey) is interpreted in consideration of other (often phenomenological) self-report data was employed in the present study. That is, information from survey responses was supplemented by semi-structured individual and group interviews with elderly and younger persons, and an attempt was made to reconstruct the

"meaning units" embedded in these interviews to better ground the evolving theory (Rennie, Phillips & Quartaro, 1988).

The purpose of the present investigation was to augment the theoretical framework for counseling with the elderly through an investigation of the expectations elderly persons have of the counseling encounter. Expressed expectations are compared to those of young persons and evaluated for their consistency across expression modalities.

Method

Subjects

Questionnaire subjects were approximately 350 persons 65 years of age or over. Subjects were enlisted through community senior citizen centers, retirement facilities and church groups for the elderly, with the majority coming from this latter setting in both the Texas and Tennessee samples. Participation in the study was voluntary, with subjects informed of the purpose of the investigation and assured that their responses would be kept in strictest confidence and used only for research purposes. Questionnaires were identified only by a subject number, and a demographic information sheet with data on subject age, sex and previous counseling experience was appended.

Approximately 400 subjects in various community settings were interviewed in a group setting. Individual interviews were conducted with approximately 10 subjects, half of whom are presently engaged in counseling at the TTU psychology clinic.

Responses of a group of non-Hispanic college students (n = 137), having completed the EAC-B in a related investigation,

served as a comparison sample. Identical administration and scoring procedures were used for each group.

Instrument

The short form of the Expectations About Counseling questionnaire (EAC-B; Tinsley et al., 1980) consists of 53 items that are grouped into 17 scales which have been shown to tap various domains of client expectancies. The scales provide information regarding client attitudes and behavior, expectations of counselor characteristics, process characteristics, and quality of outcome. Each item on the form is responded to on a 7-point Likert scale from "definitely do not expect this to be true" (1) to "definitely do expect this to be true" (7). The short form has been found to possess good reliability, with values ranging from .69 to .81 (Tinsley, 1981), and to correlate well with the long form (.78 to .95) and to be highly related to external validity criteria regarding counseling outcome (Washington & Tinsley, 1982). It is also of a length that may be suitable for administration to elderly subjects. The instrument was typeset and duplicated in a large-print version to simplify reading by elderly persons.

Procedure

Subjects were contacted at the various agencies and asked to complete the EAC-B, a task requiring approximately 30 minutes. The standard instruction set of the EAC-B was used. These written instructions instruct persons to imagine that they are about to see a counseling psychologist for the first time and asks them to report their expectations regarding their imagined

counseling experience. After completing the EAC-B, subjects were thanked and the purpose of the research clarified for them.

Analysis

Completed questionnaires (elderly n = 82, young n = 136) were analyzed for age influences through a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with each subjects' EAC-B scale scores as the dependent variables. To further identify those variables contributing most to age-related differences, a discriminant function analysis was next performed on the EAC-B scale scores for each group.

Following each individual and group meeting, investigators met to discuss and record their perceptions of emerging themes. Consistent elements of discussion were compiled and used as a context in which quantitative results could be interpreted.

Results

Statistical Analysis Results

Despite the personal encouragement of the investigators and the support of peer leaders, only approximately 15% of elderly persons consented to complete the questionnaire in group settings. Most were somewhat more forthcoming in contributing to the group discussion sessions.

Results of a MANOVA investigated the influence of age category grouping on EAC-B responses. A significant main age effect was noted ($F [1, 217] = 2.42$, $p < .01$), and was followed by examination of univariate F-tests so as to determine those variables contributing most strongly to this effect. Significant differences were found on two EAC-B scales, with elderly subjects

(M = 4.56) expressing significantly higher expectation for counselor Empathy than did younger subjects (M = 4.14; F = 5.11, $p < .05$) and significantly lower expectation (elderly M = 3.83, young M = 4.43; F = 6.05, $p < .05$) for counselor Self-Disclosure. No other EAC-B scale score differences approached significance.

Results of the discriminant function analysis further identify those variables maximally contributing to group differences. The discriminant function matrix, with variables ordered by size of correlation with the function, was as follows. It should be noted that a negative coefficient reflects relatively lower endorsement of the expectations variable by the elderly sample, and that only those values exceeding .30 in absolute value are statistically significant:

Variable	Correlation
Self-Disclosure	-.37
Empathy	.33
Acceptance	-.21
Openness	.20
Nurturance	-.19
Confrontation	-.15
Motivation	.15
Expertise	.13
Attractiveness	.06
Genuineness	-.06
Immediacy	-.06
Tolerance	.04
Concreteness	-.02
Outcome	.02
Responsibility	-.01
Trustworthiness	-.00

This function was able to correctly classify 68.5% of the sample into the correct age category based on scale responses.

Discussion Session Results

Several themes emerged from the individual and group

discussions. These will be discussed separately in terms of responses to applied psychology as a discipline, internal imperatives with respect to psychological functioning, and associations to counseling as an activity.

A consistent theme across groups was an abiding sense of suspicion and guardedness about psychology. The reluctance of most group members to complete the questionnaire was the most obvious manifestation of a possible lack of engagement. Many group members were visibly unsettled by the subsequent discussion of psychological topics despite efforts (including singing of songs and the use of positive images of aging in a slide presentation) on the part of discussion facilitators to demystify and personalize the interaction. Considerable role confusion was demonstrated around the status and function of psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health service providers. Church-affiliated elderly groups in particular seemed to demonstrate a perception of psychology as potentially intruding on other areas of their lives such as personal autonomy and spiritual orientation. Individuals were somewhat less guarded about psychology, but continued to express perceptions of its role somewhat at variance with those of mainstream younger individuals.

Another consistent theme concerned internal imperatives of psychological functioning. Among these, self-reliance was expressed with strong consistency across all subject groups. "You should be able to solve your own problems" and "In my day people didn't go running to a psychologist for every little

thing" were commonly heard. A related theme of "handing up problems to God" was also frequently voiced among religious elderly persons. Psychological problems that were viewed as "too big to handle" were often construed as "God's will" or as retribution for some weakness, sin or shortcoming. "Staying busy" was frequently described as the best antidote to most psychological ailments. Support groups such as family and friends were also occasionally mentioned as being helpful in the event of situational "blue" feelings. These imperatives were about equally demonstrated in individual and group interviews.

Finally, when asked about how they thought of counseling, many elderly persons expressed the notion that it would be necessary or helpful only for the most extreme psychological difficulty as "a last resort." Punitive and remedial themes were frequently mentioned, and queries regarding experiences with counseling often elicited associations to other drastic maladies and misfortunes. The notion of counselor as a helpful companion on a journey of self-discovery seemed quite foreign to most elderly respondents.

Discussion

Results of the present investigation are quite surprising in suggesting that based on the relatively small number of questionnaires completed, the overall pattern of expectations among these groups of elderly persons is quite comparable to that among a younger student group. Such an assertion is supported by the relatively unremarkable analysis of variance findings, even more remarkable when one considers the relatively small

percentage of questionnaires completed by elderly persons and the apparently haphazard manner in which many were completed. A strong sense of similarity is supported as well by the absence of compelling correlations of most expectation variables on the discriminant function. That the contribution of responses to Outcome and Trustworthiness to group differences approached zero was particularly unanticipated.

The verbal responses of elderly subjects in group and settings seemed much more consistent with the personal experience of the investigators and what little precedent exists in the literature. Themes from these group discussion suggested a lack of perceived relevance and importance of psychological services on the part of many elderly persons. The notion of counseling as a last resort for those abandoned by self, family and God is a haunting one.

Individual subjects' responses, particularly those from subjects presently engaged in counseling, were perhaps most consistent with the model. The perceived accessibility of psychological services for these subjects was heightened by a realistic perception of their nature and the ways in which counseling could help overcome perceived areas of vulnerability.

Augmentation of these results with additional triangulated data could clarify the apparent discrepancies presented. Additional in-depth individual interviews with elderly subjects not receiving counseling could be particularly helpful.

References

Flemming, A. S., Rickards, L. D., Santos, J. F., & West, P. R. (1986). Report of a survey of community mental health centers (Vol. 1). Washington, DC: Action Committee to Implement the Mental Health Recommendations of the 1981 White House Conference on Aging.

Hoshmand, L. L. S. T. (1989). Alternate research paradigms. The Counseling Psychologist, 17, 3-81.

Kunkel, M. A., Hector, M. A., Go'ngora-Coronado, E., Castillo-Vales, V. (in press). Toward a "Mexican psychology": Expectations about counseling in Yucata'n. Journal of Counseling Psychology.

Kunkel, M. A. & Williams, C. (1987, March). Expectations of counseling among the elderly. Paper presented at the meeting of the Southern Gerontological Association, New Orleans, LA.

Rennie, D. L., Phillips, J. R. & Quartaro, G. K. (1988). Grounded theory: A promising approach to conceptualization in psychology. Canadian Psychology, 29, 139-150.

Roybal, E. R. (1988). Mental health and aging: The need for an expanded federal response. American Psychologist, 43(3), 189-194.

Tinsley, H. E. A., Workman, K. R., & Kass, R. A. (1980). Factor analysis of the domain of client expectancies of counseling. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 27, 561-570.

U.S. General Accounting Office (1982). The elderly remain in need of mental health services (Publication No. GAO/HRd-82-112). Washington, DC: Author.

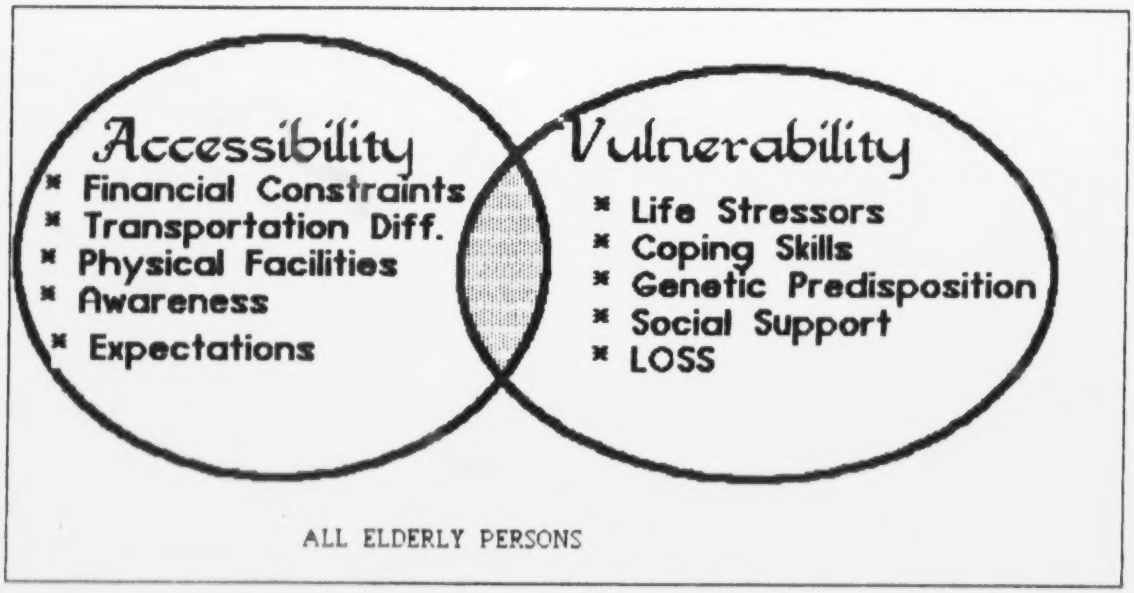

Figure 1. A model of psychological help-seeking and receptivity in the elderly.